

CHRISTIANS PERSECUTED IN ISLAMIC LANDS

November 7, 2001 (Fundamental Baptist Information Service, P.O. Box 610368, Port Huron, MI 48061-0368, 866-295-4143, fbns@wayoflife.org) - The following report is from the *Washington Times*, November 6, 2001:

The Oct. 28 attack by Islamic militants on a Pakistani church that left 16 dead dramatizes the plight of Christians in Muslim-ruled countries, and according to several human rights organizations it's a dismal one.

In many of those countries, Christians cannot openly practice their religion, nor attempt to convert others to it. Churches are not even allowed in Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan, and in other Islamic countries there are severe restrictions on where they can build and to whom they can preach the Gospel.

The religious freedom enjoyed by America's 1.8 million to 2 million Muslims - the numbers are in dispute, and some Muslim groups claim millions more - lets them construct mosques, set up their own nonprofit groups and evangelize for their religion. Protected by the First Amendment, radical Muslim groups have also freely operated and raised funds here.

The U.S. State Department's annual religious freedom report, released Oct. 25, rates Islamic-ruled Afghanistan among the worst countries - along with Burma, China, Cuba, Laos, North Korea and Vietnam - in terms of religious freedom.

Runners-up included Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Sudan, where leaving Islam for another religion is a capital offense. Turkmenistan, where four Baptists were tortured for having religious literature in their car, made the list, along with Uzbekistan.

Nigeria, Indonesia and Sudan lead the world in actual death tolls of Christians, says Paul Marshall, senior fellow of the Center for Religious Freedom at Freedom House in the District. The number of Christians and animists who have perished in the Sudan is estimated at 2 million.

In terms of Draconian government restrictions, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, Afghanistan and Turkmenistan are the most severe. Pakistan has "very bad laws," Mr. Marshall says, but "compared to these others, it's relatively open."

Iran, which allowed the slaying of several prominent Christian pastors in the mid-1990s, has severe laws against Christians trying to evangelize Muslims. But outright persecution there has lessened a bit, he says, probably due to the influence of its reform-minded president Mohammed Khatami.

Robert Finley, founder of Christian Aid, a missions organization in Charlottesville, Va., points to Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia as the most repressive countries. Iraq is the least hostile country in the Middle East toward Christians, he says, because its brand of Islam is more secularized than that of Saudi Arabia.

"But Kuwait is very intolerant of Christians," he said. "They just don't allow them."

The Kuwaiti constitution promises freedom of religion but does not address conversion. In 1996, the marriage of a Kuwaiti convert from Islam to Christianity was forcibly dissolved and his children taken from him before he underwent a much-publicized trial for apostasy.

Shafeeq Ghabra of the Kuwait Information Office says his country has plenty of churches. "There are Catholics and non-Catholics," he said in an interview. "There are several important churches there. There are hundreds of thousands of Christians in Kuwait." Most of these are expatriates, he says, estimating that 5 percent of the Kuwaiti people themselves are Christians.

Human Rights Watch cites Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, as a place where Christian villages have suffered repeated attacks from Muslim militias. Starting in 1999, the conflict has left more than 5,000 dead and at least 400,000 refugees on about a dozen islands in central Indonesia.

Although the government "appealed for humanitarian aid for the hundreds of thousands of displaced people," it says in its 2001 World Report, "it also obstructed delivery of that aid."

Steve Snyder, president of International Christian Concern in the District, has traveled to Indonesia and is trying to raise funds to rescue Christians trapped in villages surrounded by warriors belonging to Laskar Jihad, an Islamic group.

"Laskar Jihad has been continually attacking Christian villages, murdering Christians and burning down their houses, businesses and church buildings for well over a year now," he said, "and the Indonesian government has seemingly been unable or unwilling to stop them."

Punishment meted out to Christians from the Islamic militias has included a choice between conversion to Islam or death, he says. The conversions have included forced circumcisions of men, women and children.

"Laskar Jihad trained in Afghanistan," Mr. Marshall says. "Their personnel have met with Osama's networks. They've got 5,000 people who've had some military training and they've been killing, converting or forcibly driving out all the Christians in the area."

A spokesman for the Indonesian Embassy says his government is doing its best to stop the fighting. "We are promoting some measures to reconcile these groups, and we've installed our security forces to quell the violence," says Dino Djalal, head of the embassy's political section. "We've declared civil emergency in that area. Our navy has installed a blockade so the violence doesn't spread. We are sending troops there and taking care of the refugees."

A Web site set up by Islamic warriors in Indonesia (www.laskarjihad.or.id) claims that Christians, backed by Jews, are the aggressors in central Indonesia.

"The honor and existence of the ummah [Muslim community] must continually be defended in the midst of attacks by international Cross/Zionist activities," says a statement issued by Laskar Jihad. "As Muslims, we adamantly believe that a solution to the current problem ... involves a movement toward jihad."

Egypt turns a deaf ear to complaints of discrimination against Christians, Mr. Marshall says, and the lives of Christians is equally grim in Nigeria, where Islamic law, or shariah, has been implemented in 12 states.

Mr. Marshall, who visited the country in June, says 5,000 persons have died there and whole neighborhoods in the cities of Kaduna, Jos and Kano have been razed because of Muslim-Christian fighting. "On September 11, when Muslim groups took to the streets to celebrate the terrorist attacks on the United States, that rekindled violence," he says. "Some 300 to 400 people died in the two days since then."

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